

The opposition and the new political party formation in progress

The biggest divide in the opposition is not on the nature of the repressive regime we have in our country. It is not on the dismal social, political, and economic realities in Eritrea. It is not the massive human rights abuses and violations perpetuated on our people. The divide is on the strategies and visions the Eritrean opposition forces are pursuing to bring the much-needed democratic rule in our country. This division further worsened by the lack of resolve to face our negative political culture we inherited from the liberation era, a culture characterized by disagreements and sometimes by hostile and aggressive attitude towards one another. These disagreements turned to conflict and became basis for our continued mutual destruction and intolerance towards one another for the last eight years (since the formation of the first alliance).

For example, consider the experiences and efforts spent over the last eight years. The mark date here is March 1999, a year in which all the ELF offshoots came together and established the first alliance after years of feet dragging. The assumption has always been and is that the formation of an umbrella organization would earn us a broad support of Eritrean people; it would also speed up the removal of the tyranny in Eritrea. Yes, starting from the first alliance to the second and finally to the formation of EDA were all efforts to form a strong opposition force. On surface, the initiative was positive. However, all collapsed, leaving Eritrean people with perennial mistrust, suspicion, and intolerance. The last EDA came close to inspiring and raising some hopes, but it did not pull long and it too split in two blocks. The unsuccessful alliances attempted over the years reversed the progress of opposing the tyranny by many folds. It undermined the role of the Eritrean people; it created a silent majority; it damaged the relationship amongst the opposition members; it brought more splinter groups; and it weakened the role and participation of the Eritrean people. All this gave the ruthless government a free hand to continue its repression unhindered. Simply put, the strategy of the alliance did not deliver. This is not to point fingers and to engage in accusations and counter accusations, or to discourage future alliances. It is simply the reality of Eritrean opposition forces. We need to deal with it at a strategic level.

The experience of the alliance/EDA is full of statistics. The point is we try to explain what alliance (umbrella organization) should be, but we hardly explain what it should not be. The truth is the unworkable alliance tried over the years, but has stifled the possibility of forming a formidable opposition force. It also served as a fighting ground amongst the organizations, undercutting the bigger picture, which is removing the repressive government and installing a dynamic multiparty system of governance in its place. This is not to undermine the importance of working together, but despite the good intentions, the formation of an umbrella organization has not been the priority of the member groups. It is good to talk what alliance is, but it is equally important to talk what alliance is not. We can no longer live in fear of our divergent opinions and views. We cannot blindly equate the current alliance with much success, either. The opposition organizations' divisiveness is a disservice to our people. In fact, the regime in Asmara got a blank check and took the country downhill since independence because the opposition was brought to its knees by its own making. This is one reason why the opposition needs to seek a new direction and fundamental change.

We are only as good as our commonalities

Now, with the repressive government edging our country toward incalculable destruction, the advocacy for the revival of the EDA or similar institution represents a positive step. However, focusing only on the importance of EDA without examining the past failures and experiences is not reassuring. For example, the members of the alliance have collectively talked about their commitments and promises: they promised to end divisions, they promised to work in one voice, they promised to rally Eritrean people, and finally they promised to remove the destructive regime from the face of our country. Yet, the opposition registered no success on any of the challenges our country is facing. No doubt, the experience of the alliance to some degree brought an atmosphere of consultation and debate in our political culture, notwithstanding the continued intolerance and lack of progress on the main issue, namely managing and administering our differences democratically which is the core failure of our opposition.

Second, recognizing the drawbacks that prevented the opposition members from functioning as an umbrella would benefit us in addressing the current stalemate. At least we have to raise some questions. What has the recent EDA achieved? What did the previous alliances achieve? Could we have done things differently? What are the barriers? How can we make it better in the future? In reality, the alliance/EDA by definition is a relative association; it is not an absolute, in that the present alliance/EDA composed of more than ten organizations/political groups is as diverse as the Eritrean people are. Thus, there are commonalities of programs that would pull all members to operate together. And the first order should focus working on those commonalities. In my view, the upcoming March 2008 meeting of the EDA members presents an opportunity to engage in a candid discussion that would strengthen our similarities and narrow down our differences. The conventional way of tackling issues is not productive. The members should stay out of mundane politics and face their fears and doubts. We have to extricate ourselves from the no EDA no opposition frame of mind.

Third, we should not lose track of the rest of the programs that divide the EDA members. Diversity of opinion is democratic; it is not something that widens our differences as is presented by some. The EDA/alliance is a process; it is not an end in itself. The principal objective of the EDA/alliance is to work together on the agreeable programs, and to find a formula on issues that are not agreeable to all. I believe we need to recognize our strengths and weaknesses because our political ills are not over with the establishment of one alliance or another. We have done that in the past. Remember, the opposition politics went through coalition, alliance, united front, and 4+1, but all went off the cliff. The country cannot afford to be subjected again to another similar round of disaster and disappointment. One has to be pragmatic in our situation in that the opposition should not limit itself to the umbrella organization. We should answer the bigger issues of the people. This brings me to the party formation resolution ELF-RC adopted in its sixth congress in the summer of 2006. Thus, developing a new direction and introducing a sweeping strategy aimed at reaching out the younger generation in particular and the majority of Eritrean people in general are crucial to the success of the struggle. This approach will eliminate the widely held fears, biases, divisions, and views born out of the liberation era (ELF vs. EPLF

culture). This is also decisive because the success of future democracy in Eritrea depends on answering this deep-rooted negative political and cultural divide in our society. The present opposition members have had little or no success to bridge the gap. The result: some people rendered little or no support, some lost hope, some questioned the legitimacy of the opposition, and the youth could not find a reason to relate to or associate with the opposition. The new political party formation strategy can bring new hopes, directions and democratic ideals to the opposition (more on this below).

The bottom line

It is time for the political organizations to face the reality of Eritrean opposition crisis. They have sat over unsuccessful opposition for so long partly created by the unworkable ‘alliance’, and partly by the lack of well-defined and objective strategy. Now, the call for change is surfacing from many directions: a call for new direction, a call for a new strategy, a call for a new chapter, and a call for a strong and participatory opposition force. ELF-RC has answered the call by adopting a resolution in its sixth congress: the formation of a broad base political party. ELF-RC took this measure following long and extensive studies prior to its congress. This shift in paradigm is democratic and timely. ELF-RC did not cast itself as a dominant force when it passed this resolution in its last congress. ELF-RC simply took the initiative, assessed the opposition forces’ direction as leading Eritrean people nowhere, and introduced the party formation where every Eritrean can participate to build the new party from scratch. ELF-RC is not in charge. Instead, ELF-RC recognized the need for change, a change that is badly needed across the Eritrean political spectrum. It made a conscious decision to break the liberation era political and cultural barrier, which has become a big liability in our search for a formidable opposition force in Eritrea. In my opinion, the call for party formation does not undermine or oppose the existence of coalition or umbrella organization in the opposition. In fact, the strategy can help narrow down the number of splinter groups particularly if other groups follow the footsteps of ELF-RC and choose to dissolve and join the process. Equally, any future alliance/coalition would be successful only if it focused on shared and common objectives, achievable programs, and on limited scopes. We can no longer afford to have an opposition that adopts charter after charter it cannot honor. Similarly, alliance/EDA works only if we avoid the culture of mutual political destructions as well as breeding splinter groups every now and then for no purpose other than to rationalize differences and maintain the status quo.

The way I understood the party formation process

- The process is all-inclusive: every input and idea counts and shapes the new party. The process is open, transparent, and participatory by all accounts. The platform is not a readymade material, but open for constructive critiques and productive ideas. The party in progress can realize our common wishes, gains, and interests in future Eritrea.
- The party draft platform is out in the public. The campaign to reach out Eritrean people is in full swing. The commission expects to receive a wide array of ideas to perfect the draft platform. The communication between the commission and the public is a two-way channel.

The mandate of the commission is to ensure and encourage the public to play a crucial role in owning the process. I believe we have to own the process.

- This dynamic process would change the negative political culture and introduce democratization process in the present struggle that would inspire confidence and attract younger generation across the board. The new party sees a strong participation of our younger generation in the leadership of the new party.
- The party formation strategy does not promote exclusion or dominance. Nor does it undermine the role and rights of other Eritrean opposition forces. It simply advocates that message of the opposition does not resonate with the majority of Eritrean people in general, and with younger generation in particular. Only a democratic opposition based on a broad participation ensures the rights of individuals/groups, and carries great hope for the people of Eritrea and its diversity.
- ELE-RC: ELE-RC members, its civic organizations, and its support organs have equal access in the process as much as any non ELE-RC. This is a plain field.

Conclusion

The repressive government has plunged our country into immeasurable crisis. We also know the ramification of not having a strong opposition. The implications and the risks are far greater than the present situation. Eritrea as a country is on the verge of disintegration; and we the people of Eritrea might lose our hard won independence if we fail to address the opposition strategically. The new party formation is one way of addressing the various challenges our country is facing. No doubt, only a force born out of a broad public participation and ownership can defeat the present tyrannical government in our country.

ELF-RC made a historic move in leading this great endeavor. It prudently assessed the present realities of the opposition force and the changing priorities of our country. In my view, the new party will harmonize our common interests, restores the legitimacy of the opposition, changes the struggle era negative political culture, and turns the passive participation of citizens to active involvement. In addition, forming a new party will lead to the birth of other political parties in future Eritrea reflecting the diversity of our people. The call for a broad base political party formation if embraced fully would guarantee the removal of the tyranny from our country and replace it with a democratic system. Eritrean people have the potential to make this mission successful. The process is open for constructive debate. The draft platform is out for the public to comment, review, improve, and supplement it. For the younger generation: you have a big stake in the new political party; it is your country; it is your future; it is your party; it is your right, and you must not miss this opportunity. At the end of the day, you have no one to blame but yourself if you fail to seize this opportunity and use it to realize your democratic dreams.

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